

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on June 13, 2021.

THE PURPOSE OF WORSHIP

And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah will flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the valley in Shittim. Joel 3:18

In March of 2020 the exploding positive tests for the Covid virus shut down much of our common life. We were forced to suspend in-person worship for an unknown period of time. We at Clarence Presbyterian were very fortunate that we began live streaming our services a couple of years ago. We did not have to struggle, like many of our sister congregations, to develop technology to share our worship services.

We did make changes to our worship to protect those who came to the building to help lead our services. We wore masks when not speaking. We stayed more than ten feet apart. We left the building soon after completing our work.

At the end of June 2020, we were able to re-open for in-person worship, but this worship was very different from our normal experience. People were only allowed to sit in every third pew, masks were worn at all times, there was no congregational singing. People came in and sat down and did not move, there was no standing and sitting, taking the offering or greeting others. In order to reduce possible exposure many elements of worship were either eliminated or shortened. We tried to keep the whole experience to 35-40 minutes.

It now appears all the numbers concerning the virus are headed in the right direction and by fall we may largely be back to normal. We will then be able to shape worship in the way that we would like. This gives us the opportunity to rethink how we worship. We can learn from the pandemic experience what parts of worship are essential and what elements of worship we can do without. For example, we may want to give more space to prayer and not pass the peace. We might want more silent prayer and less spoken prayer.

This summer I would like to explore both the purpose, principles and elements of worship that shape our Sunday experience. The goal is to seek to learn from our Covid experiences how to shape our liturgy in meaningful ways. I invite your feedback all through the summer. In August the Worship Committee will meet in order reform our liturgy for the Fall.

Today we look at the global question of purpose. What is the purpose of worship? There is not just one purpose. Men and women come to worship for a variety of reasons. One reason is fellowship. Jesus said, **For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.** It is important for Christians to come together to support one another.

I have been told that sometime last fall one of our small sister churches decided to return to in-person worship. They put in place all the proper protocols to keep everyone safe. These included social distancing and leaving as soon as the service was completed.

After a couple of weeks, they decided to stop in-person worship. This was because a large percentage of the people felt that if they could not socialize it was not worth coming. For that congregation the central purpose of worship was fellowship.

While I do not believe the prime purpose of worship is fellowship, it is important. Gathering with fellow Christians does encourage us in our faith. Worship is the gathering of the faithful before

God. It is not easy to be a Christian. We face temptation every day of our lives. We are plagued by doubts, we wonder why there is suffering, we sometimes question the meaning of our faith. We also know we are surrounded by many people who reject God.

We need the help and encouragement of fellow Christians. There are times when we can believe that we are the only Christians in the world. We wonder if anyone else prays. Thus, it is helpful for us to come and share in worship. When we see another worker from the office worshiping God, or the lady that works in the doctor's office praying or another kid from my school going up for the children's sermon it gives encouragement to our faith. There is no doubt that there is strength in numbers.

So, as we come together to worship, we come to pray for each other, bear one another's burdens and encourage each other in faithfulness. I am glad to say we will begin to have coffee hour outside next Sunday.

A second purpose of worship is to help form our faith. Worship can help to shape how we think and what we believe and how we pray. Many of the elements of our worship service are repeated week after week. We confess our sins, we sing the doxology, we pray and hear the readings from the Scripture. The mere fact that we repeat these parts of the service week after week can mold how we think and what we believe.

The Church I served in Attica used an English version of the Kyrie in the confessional part of the service. The Kyrie is one of the most ancient parts of Christian worship coming to us from the early church. Kyrie Eleison is Greek for "Lord Have mercy upon us."

One of the parents in the Church said that she came out of her house one day and saw her five-year-old on the swing. Krista was swinging back and forth on her swing, singing at the top of her lungs, Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us.

Krista was in worship every week. She had absorbed part of the liturgy. I believe that these words were beginning to shape what she thought and believed about God.

I believe that the same is true for you and me. When we participate in worship regularly, the service begins to shape how we pray and how we think about God and even how we perceive reality itself. The prayers, the singing, the Scriptures and the Sermon all work towards giving us understanding. Worship helps to give form to our faith.

There are many purposes of worship which include fellowship and formation and others. But these are secondary. The primary purpose of worship is to connect us with the divine. All the things I have talked about before are important for us. Yet the primary reason you and I should come to worship is to experience the presence of God.

We human beings have been created with a need for God. One modern writer said

There is an emptiness at our core that is like a Black Hole in space. A Black Hole sucks down all matter, and there is an emptiness in us which threatens to suck us down as well, although what it is actually doing is dispelling an illusion. It is not destroying us, but revealing to us that we are already a dead thing trying to give itself life by taking in all within its reach. But the core of us remains an emptiness. To be a person, a soul, is to need something beyond oneself to live; whatever we can grasp cannot give us life. No matter what efforts we make to fill ourselves, we always find ourselves once again empty. We carry that emptiness and that deadness within us.

This leads us to our text for this morning. In the Bible one of the most powerful symbols of God's life giving presence is water. Water is a fundamental need for all living things. It is needed for life. Joel speaks of God's love in these words: **all the streambeds of Judah will flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the valley.**

I first became fully aware of the power in the symbol of water on my first overseas trip, which took place in college. A group of twelve students and a professor spent one month on an archeological tour in the Middle East. Our first stop was Egypt. We flew from New York to Athens and then changed planes for Cairo. We flew over the Mediterranean and then followed the Nile to Cairo. As you looked down from the plane you could draw a straight-line on either side of the Nile, which separated the fertile land from the desert. It was absolutely amazing. If you look at a map of Egypt the landmass is very large, but only a small percentage of the land can support crops. From the air this is perfectly clear.

Egypt does not receive very much rain. The Nile is the source of irrigation. Each year when the rains come to Kenya, Ethiopia and the Sudan, the tributaries cause the Nile to overflow and flood the land downstream. This helps them become fertile. Remember the Nile flows south to north towards the Mediterranean. We saw an interesting archeological discovery in what is called Upper Egypt. On a rock there were a series of lines with hieroglyphics carved beside them. This was an ancient measuring device. These hieroglyphics indicated that when the Nile reached each of these heights it meant that a certain amount of land would be flooded downstream. The higher the water the more productive the land would be in the coming growing season. The Egyptian leaders could plan on how much food would be available the next year.

The Nile reminds us that life is found only near water. We must be near the source of water to survive. Water gives life. When people are taken into the hospital often the first thing done is to insert an IV. This is done not only to be a means of giving medication but also to give hydration to the patient. An illness often results in a lack of water in a person's system. We need water to live.

Water plays a role in Christian worship. In baptism we place water on a person's forehead to remind them that as God gave them physical life, so he has given new life in the Spirit to those who come to him. Just as water is needed for the body so the love of God is needed for the soul.

One of the famous interviews that Jesus had was with a Samaritan woman. Jesus had been traveling for some time and was tired and sat down next to a well. A Samaritan woman came to the well and Jesus asked her to draw some water for him. She was taken aback for Jews and Samaritans were very hostile to each other, in much the same way as Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland. She asks him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria." Jesus took this opportunity to teach. He said, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

Jesus then went on to tell her that he could give her water unlike the water from the well. "Everyone who drinks the water of the well will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst." Of course Jesus is not speaking here of some kind of magic water. Jesus is talking in symbolic language. Just as our bodies experience thirst, so can our souls feel parched and dry, our lives can lack meaning and purpose and joy.

Joel pictures our lives without God as being dried up streambeds. We know in our very being what Joel is talking about. We know those days when our souls feel shriveled.

Days when nothing seems interesting,
Nothing seems worth doing,
Nothing makes us satisfied.

Our life can seem like a dried up riverbed, full of dust to be blown away.

True life comes from the water of the Spirit found in the presence of God. It is the presence of the Risen Christ in our lives that can give us joy, purpose, support comfort and above all, life.

About thirty years ago Kathleen and I attended a retirement party for Monsignor Hogan. He was a colleague in the LaSalle Clergy Association. The dinner was held at what was then called the Best Western on the River. This hotel had in many ways the nicest banquet room in Niagara Falls. It is on the second floor of the building facing the Niagara River. The whole wall facing the River is glass. Unfortunately the service at this hotel could be as bad as the view was good. It soon became apparent that the head table had not been properly set.

Bishop Mansell was the prime speaker that evening. He began his remarks by turning to the window and saying, "Is it not interesting that one third of the fresh water in the world travels by this window and we can't get any in our water glasses?"

I believe this experience relates to some people's experience of worship.

If we come to worship expecting to be entertained,
If we come on Sunday for merely a lecture,
If we sit in a pew hoping for a mini-concert,
If the leaders of worship think they are the center of attention.

The worship experience will be like sitting at that head table at that Banquet.
You may sense God is somewhere,
You may enjoy contact with your friends,
You may enjoy the singing,

But God will not impact your mind and heart.
Your thirst for God will not be satisfied.

Life is found on the side of the River. Worship is the means by which we move toward the River. You and I cannot be spectators in worship. We are called to pray, to sing and actively listen. For it is in the pew that the real work of worship is done.

Worship is where we most often come in contact with the water that gives us growth. When we gather in our Sanctuary, we are to seek the presence of the living God. The living God is the only source of the water that can satisfy our parched souls, our very being with his presence. God's grace can be ours when we understand the primary purpose of worship is contact with God. We come to drink from the river.

We come because the river is here.

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